He began to row, and we immediately heard the oars splashing behind us in the darkness. He stopped, and after two or three strokes the other boat stopped also. No sound came from the darkness.

"They have two or three pairs of oars," remarked Mikhail. "A fairly large boat. . . ."

"Should we land?"

"No, we are better off on the river. Even if they have evil intentions, they would have slim advantage over us on water."

"Let them pass us?"

"They would have passed us hours ago if they had wanted to. They are keeping their distance."

Mikhail was rowing with all his strength. We heard the other boat following us but could not see it. The moon was high in front of us. Perhaps those in the strange boat could see the silhouette of our skiff.

Suddenly Mikhail whispered to me, "Turn the rudder to the right. There is a light on the shore, steer right above it."

We could see clearly the outline of a bark and shadows of people around a campfire at the edge of the forest. The boat that had followed us stopped in the middle of the river, then turned abruptly, steering toward the campfire and cutting across our course. With three pairs of oars and six oarsmen, she made better speed than our skiff. She was between us and the campfire when we noticed lights high on the other bank—a village! Now we were completely safe.

"Put your rudder left," whispered Mikhail. "They may sleep at the campfire if they wish. The river is ours now."

When we were back in the main current, Mikhail turned the oars over to me and took his place at the stern for a brief nap.

In the morning we landed on a low bank, lit a fire, and made tea. The map showed we had made less progress than I had expected.

"There is no point in wasting time for meals," said Mikhail. "Next time we shall make tea on the river." He put a piece of sod about four feet square on the bottom of the skiff and arranged strong green sticks on both sides of it to support a kettle or pan. Meanwhile I collected dry brushwood for our little kitchen.

Henceforth we stopped only at rare villages to replenish our provisions. Only once did we sleep in the forest at a splendid campfire, because it was too cold on the river. We kept in the middle of the stream, in the strongest current, but it took us four days to reach Ust Kut, some three hundred miles from Kachuga.

It was clear that, at this speed, it would take too long to get to the mouth of the Aldan. We therefore decided to trade the delightful discomfort of our skiff for the steamer. We boarded the vessel roped to the pier, and I gave the captain a letter from his company that assured